

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-11

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 CIAE-00 NSAE-00 NSCE-00
SSO-00 ICAE-00 INRE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-10 L-03
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OMB-01 NEAE-00 /090 W
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O R 151547Z MAY 78
FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3118
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY BONN
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
AMEMBASSY PARIS
AMEMBASSY TEHRAN
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
USMISSION USUN
USMISSION SINAI
DIA WASHDC
CINCEUR

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 TEL AVIV 6268

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, PEPR, IS
SUBJECT: CABINET BACKS C/S EITAN IN WEEKLY SESSION

REF: TEL AVIV 6201

1. SUMMARY: IN THE MAY 14 CABINET SESSION, PRIME MINISTER
BEGIN REVIEWED HIS WASHINGTON VISIT AND DEFENCE MINISTER WEIZ-
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MAN SURVEYED THE SITUATION IN SOUTH LEBANON. AN IN-DEPTH
DISCUSSION OF THE US ADMINISTRATION'S QUESTIONS ON THE
FUTURE OF THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES WAS POSTPONED UNTIL NEXT
WEEK'S SESSION, FOLLOWING DAYAN'S RETURN. MINISTERS
EXPRESSED ALARM OVER THE CONGRESSIONAL DEBATE ON THE
ARMS PACKAGE AND URGED A MORE FORCEFUL EXPOSITION OF
THE GOI'S OPPOSITION TO THE ADMINISTRATION PROPOSAL. THIS

WAS THE BACKGROUND FOR THE STATEMENT OF THE ISRAELI EMBASSY IN WASHINGTON, WHICH FOLLOWED SEVERAL HOURS LATER. THE BULK OF THE CABINET SESSION WAS DEVOTED TO DISCUSSION OF GEN. EITAN'S TELEVISION INTERVIEW. WHILE WEIZMAN INITIALLY PRESENTED A RATHER LUKEWARM DEFENSE OF HIS CHIEF OF STAFF, IN THE END HE JOINED HIS LIKUD AND NRP COLLEAGUES IN A CABINET EXPRESSION OF SUPPORT FOR EITAN. THE THREE DMC MINISTERS FOUND THEMSELVES IN LONELY OPPOSITION. WEIZMAN'S DISCOMFITURE WITH EITAN'S REPEATED INFELICITOUS PUBLIC STATEMENTS IS APPARENTLY SHARED BY SOME IN THE HIGHER RANKS OF THE MILITARY. IT IS LIKELY THAT EITAN'S PRONOUNCEMENTS WILL BE MORE CLOSELY MONITORED IN THE FUTURE. END SUMMARY.

2. IN THE WEEKLY CABINET SESSION ON MAY 14, PRIME MINISTER BEGIN PRESENTED A BRIEF REVIEW OF HIS WASHINGTON VISIT. A COMPREHENSIVE DISCUSSION OF THE TWO QUESTIONS ON THE FUTURE OF THE TERRITORIES PUT TO DAYAN AND BEGIN BY THE ADMINISTRATION IS TO BE POSTPONED, HOWEVER, UNTIL NEXT WEEK, FOLLOWING THE RETURN OF THE FOREIGN MINISTER FROM SCANDANAVIA. DEFENSE MINISTER WEIZMAN BRIEFED THE CABINET ON SOUTH LEBANON AND ON HIS DISCUSSIONS WITH UN FORCES COORDINATOR SIILASVUO.

3. SEVERAL MINISTERS REPORTEDLY EXPRESSED DISMAY OVER THE ARMS PACKAGE DEBATE AND URGED CONTINUED FORCEFUL EXPRESSION OF THE GOI'S OPPOSITION DESPITE INDICATIONS THAT THE
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PRESIDENT WILL IN THE END PREVAIL IN CONGRESS. WHILE NO CABINET DECISION WAS TAKEN ON THE MATTER, THE ISRAELI EMBASSY STATEMENT MADE THAT SAME EVENING IS TO BE SEEN AS A RESPONSE TO THESE MINISTERIAL DEMANDS FOR YET ANOTHER OFFICIAL ARTICULATION OF THE ISRAELI STANCE. THE EMBASSY COMMENT UNIQUE WAS IMMEDIATELY INTERPRETED ON THE MAIN TELEVISION NEWS PROGRAM LAST NIGHT AS AN ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE GOVERNMENT'S WILLINGNESS TO FOREGO SUPPLY OF ADDITIONAL F-15'S IN ORDER TO PREVENT THEIR ACQUISITION BY SAUDI ARABIA. THIS INTERPRETATION WAS SUBSEQUENTLY WATERED DOWN BY MORE NUANCED EXPLANATIONS AND LAST NIGHT'S STATEMENT IS NOW TAKEN AS SIMPLY A REPETITION OF THE ESTABLISHED ISRAELI STAND.

4. THE REMAINDER OF THE CABINET SESSION WAS GIVEN OVER TO A DISCUSSION OF C/S EITAN'S INDEPENDENCE DAY TELEVISION INTERVIEW (REFTEL). DEFENSE MINISTER WEIZMAN STOLE MOST OF DEPUTY PREMIER YADIN'S POTENTIAL THUNDER BY TAKING THE INITIATIVE IN BRINGING UP THE EITAN INTERVIEW FOR DISCUSSION. WEIZMAN REPORTEDLY STATEXFTPAT HAD HE BEEN IN EITAN'S POSITION, HE WOULD NOT HAVE MADE SIMILAR STATEMENTS, AND SUGGESTED THAT IF HE HAD REVIEWED THE INTERVIEW WITH EITAN IN ADVANCE IT WOULD HAVE BEEN LESS PROVACATIVE. BUT WHILE EITAN MAY NOT

HAVE MUCH OF A TALENT FOR FACILE VERBAL FORMULATIONS, IT
IS CLEAR THAT HIS REMARKS DID NOT EXCEED HIS AUTHORITY
AS CHIEF OF STAFF, SAID WEIZMAN.

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5. DMC MINISTERS YADIN, TAMIR AND KATZ, WHILE NOT ATTACK-
ING THE SUBSTANCE OF EITAN'S REMARKS, QUESTIONED THE
PROPRIETY OF A CHUEF OF STAFF ENGAGING IN PUBLIC DISCUSSION
OF POLITICAL QUESTIONS. IN CONTRAST TO WEIZMAN'S LUKE-
WARM DEFENSE AND THE DMC'S RESERVATIONS, THE OTHER LIKUD
AND NRP MINISTERS STRONGLY SUPPORTED BOTH EITAN'S RIGHT (IN-
DEED DUTY) TO EXPRESS HIS VIEWS ON MATTERS INVOLVING MILITARY
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SECURITY AS WELL AS RELATED POLICY QUESTIONS. MINISTERS SHARON, HURWITZ AND SHOSTAK PRAISED GEN. EITAN FOR REMINDING THE NATION ONCE MORE OF THE VITAL SECURITY SIGNIFICANCE OF JUDEA AND SAMARIA. PRIME MINISTER BEGIN VOICED SIMILAR SUPPORT. THE CABINET COMMUNIQUE, HOWEVER, ONLY SPARINGLY NOTED THAT EITAN'S REMARKS WERE CONSISTENT WITH THE GOVERNMENT'S PEACE POSITION AND DID NOT VIOLATE THE PRINCIPLE OF CIVILIAN SUPREMACY OVER THE MILITARY.

6. COMMENT: IT IS INTERESTING THAT DEFENSE MINISTER WEIZMAN OPENED THE CABINET SESSION WITH A LESS THAN EFFUSIVE EXPRESSION OF SUPPORT FOR GEN. EITAN. SOME JOURNALISTS SPECULATED THAT HAD ANY MINISTERS IN ADDITION TO THOSE REPRESENTING THE DMC VOICED CRITICISM OF EITAN, WEIZMAN WOULD HAVE BEEN PREPARED TO DISAVOW HIS CHIEF OF STAFF'S TV REMARKS MORE EXPLICITLY. WHEN, HOWEVER, HE FOUND HIS LIKUD AND NRP COLLEAGUES UNANIMOUSLY PRAISING GEN. EITAN, HE HELD BACK. INDEED, BY THE END OF THE CABINET SESSION WEIZMAN WAS VERY MUCH IN TUNE WITH THE CHORUS OF APPROBATION. WHILE WE DO NOT SHARE THE VIEW THAT WEIZMAN WAS PREPARED TO REPUDIATE HIS CHIEF OF STAFF'S REMARKS, HIS DISCOMFITURE WITH EITAN'S PUBLIC STATEMENTS IS REPORTEDLY SHARED BY SOME IN THE HIGHER RANKS OF THE MILITARY. A SENIOR IDF OFFICER TOLD ARMA THAT HE DEPLORED THE TIMING OF EITAN'S REMARKS AND HIS UNWILLINGNESS TO EXPRESS A HOPE FOR OR EVEN REFER TO A POSSIBLE CHANGE IN THE SECURITY SIGNIFICANCE OF JUDEA AND SAMARIA WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF A REAL PEACE TO BE ARRIVED AT THROUGH NEGOTIATIONS. PUBLIC COMMENT ON THE EITAN INTERVIEW CONTINUED TO FOLLOW PREDICTABLE PATTERNS, AND IT HAS BECOME CLEAR THAT EITAN'S IMAGE AS THE QUINTESSENTIAL ISRAELI FIGHTING MAN HAS SO FAR BLUNTED MUCH OF THE CRITICISM. THE WIDELY ACCEPTED ARGUMENT THAT EITAN IS APOLITICAL AND THAT ANYTHING HE SAYS IS BY DEFINITION A MATTER OF SECURITY

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SHIELDED HIM THIS TIME. IT IS SAFE TO ASSUME, HOWEVER, THAT THE DEFENSE MINISTER WILL FROM NOW ON TAKE GREATER CARE IN MONITORING THE CHIEF OF STAFF'S PUBLIC STATEMENTS.

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